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ABSTRACT

This report analyses six current educational reform proposals: (1) "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983); (2) "Action for Excellence" (Task Force on Education for Economic Growth of the Education Commission of the States, 1983); (3) "The Twentieth Century Fund Task Force Report on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy: Making the Grades" (1983); (4) "High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America" (E. L. Boyer, 1983); (5) "The Holmes Group Report: Tomorrow's Teachers" (1986); and (6) "A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century" (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986). Debates center on student evaluation, teacher preparation, appropriate standards for assessment, and social versus academic goals. The various recommendations made by the reports illustrate the controversial nature of how to achieve educational excellence and the conflicts of interest inherent in the American educational reform movement. A conclusion is that consensus among interested populations will be difficult to reach. (6 references) (LMI)

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AMERICAN EDUCATION UNDER FIRE: AN EXPLORATION OF SELECTED MAJOR CONTEMPORARY REPORTS

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INTRODUCTION

This article explores and analyzes selected current educational reform proposals. Americans, appreciably more so than others, are never satisfied with the status of their schools and constantly question the purpose, goals, and methods their schools use. It is also clear that the system lacks within itself the capacity for its own reform.

The battle cry for reforms came from many directions: the public, professional organizations, heads of business and industrial organizations, state governments, and the federal authorities.

A flurry of studies and recommendations to remedy the perilous health of education in the United States appeared during the last decade. No less than a dozen serious and exhaustive analyses of education were published. What follows in this article is an interpretive summary of some of the leading voices of reforms as to what ails American education. They were especially selected for their independence, orientation, national scope and varied sources, e.g., national, philanthropic, and state

government. Four studies concerned themselves with public education, while the last two are concerned with reforming teacher education.

I. The National Commission on Excellence in Education

The most demonstrable example of the role of the national government in managing educational matters in the last decade can be seen in the vigorous initiative by the Secretary of the Department of Education and his report, "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform."

The Commission's Charter specifies several broad goals: (1) the assessment of schools' teaching and learning, (2) a comparison of the American education system with those of other advanced countries, (3) analyzing the relationships between college admission standards and high school curriculum and student achievement, (4) determining the effect of recent major social and educational changes, (5) identifying problems, and (6) holding hearings and receiving testimony on how to promote excellence in education. The report touches all segments of society: parents, students, teachers, administrators, school board members, and politicians. It ominously describes the risk to the nation resulting from what it calls the "mediocrity" in the educational system as indicated by declining SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores, international comparisons of student achievement, etc.

The Commission's recommendations revolve around five aspects of the educational process: content, expectations, time, teaching, and leadership.

Content: It recommends that state and local high school graduation requirements be strengthened and that, at minimum, diploma candidates be required to study the "Five New Basics": four years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of social studies, three years of science, and one-half year of computer science. In addition, it is suggested that two years of a foreign language be required for the college-bound student.

Standards and Expectations: It urges schools, colleges, and universities to raise their academic standard and that colleges and universities elevate their admission requirements.

Time: It advocates that significantly more time be devoted to the "New Basics" by requiring more effective use of the existing school time, a longer school day, or a longer school year.

Teaching: It must consist of seven parts, each intended to improve teacher preparation or enhance the profession's esteem. These proposals include high educational standards for teachers, increased salaries, adoption of an 11-month contract, the development of career ladders, use of nonschool personnel resources to relieve the shortages of mathematics and science teachers, the availability of incentives to attract outstanding students into teaching, and the involvement of master teachers in designing teacher preparation programs.

Leadership and Fiscal Support: It urges the population to hold educators responsible for the necessary leadership to achieve these reforms and also to provide the necessary

monetary backing. The Commission believes the federal role to include provisions for key groups such as the gifted, the disadvantaged, the minority students, and the handicapped. In addition, the federal government needs to protect the constitutional and civil rights of students and school personnel; collect data on education; support curriculum improvement on research on teaching, learning, and school management; support teacher training in areas of critical shortage; and provide student financial assistance and research and graduate training. Thus, the Commission charges the federal government with the primary responsibility of "identifying" the national interest in education. The report concludes on an optimistic note suggesting that the nation can meet its goal of excellence in education.

II. Action for Excellence--Task Force on Education for Economic Growth

This effort was sponsored by the Education Commission of the States, is a comprehensive national plan with the aim of improving education for economic growth. The report offers eight recommendations.

Recommendation 1 suggests that the U.S. must develop and put into effect as soon as possible state plans for improving public education from kindergarten to the completion of high school education. Specifically, each governor was to appoint a task force for education and economic growth and each school district was to develop its own plan. Recommendation 2 involves the creation of a broader and more efficient partner

ship for improving education, especially via an increased business involvement, while Recommendation 3 calls for better use of resources such as enriched academic programs and improvement in management. Increased state and local commitment along with continued federal support is urged. Upgrading the image of the teaching profession is the theme of Recommendation 4. Its suggestions include improvement in the recruitment, training, and salaries of teachers; the establishment of career ladders; and a method for rewarding teachers. Recommendation 5 strives for a more productive education experience to be obtained by more demanding requirements for discipline, attendance, homework, and grades.

Quality assurance is another prime concern, and Recommendation 6 stresses the development of systems for measuring teacher effectiveness and for rewarding outstanding performance. According to the Task Force, the certification process should be improved, competency testing should be implemented, and higher education entrance requirements should be raised. Improved leadership and management in the schools is the goal of Recommendation 7. This is to be accomplished by giving administrators more responsibility, by paying them according to their effectiveness, and by raising the standards for the recruitment, training, and evaluation of school administrators. Recommendation 8 focuses on better serving those students who are now unserved or underserved by increasing women's and minorities' participation in courses where they are underrepresented, by insuring that education resources are fairly

distributed, by challenging the gifted students, by working to reduce absenteeism, and by specifically including handicapped students in programs for educational and economic growth. The report predicts that despite the problems facing the American economic and educational systems, the country can improve its public education.

III. The Twentieth Century Fund Task Force Report (1983)

This report states that elementary and secondary schools are neglecting their fundamental purposes, which include the basic skills of reading, writing, and calculation; technical capability in computers; training in science and foreign languages; and knowledge of civics. This neglect constitutes a national priority which necessitates the federal government's supplementing local communities and states in the areas of quality, equality, and equality control.

The Task Force's quality concern includes the national leadership being provided for elementary and secondary education. The federal government is urged to reiterate and emphasize that better schools and education are a national priority. The declining state of the teaching profession is recognized in this study and the following recommendations are made: (1) the status of teaching must be reinforced, (2) incentives for entering the profession must be provided, (3) teachers must be encouraged to improve their skills, and (4) outstanding teachers must be recognized. The Task Force believes that quality in education centers on the specific areas of language training, science, and mathematics education. The resulting

recommendation is for the government to identify literacy in English as the most important objective and that every U.S. public school provide the opportunity to acquire proficiency in a second language.

The equality concern of the Task Force urges the continued federal support of all the special categories of students. In addition, the Task Force recommends that the federal government continue its support for the collection and investigation of educational data to insure quality control. Thus, the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force strongly believes that the federal government should increase its involvement in education by supplementing states and local districts to insure the rational interest of high quality schools.

IV. High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America

This report, sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, is the result of a two-year study which analyzed high school teachers, students, and curriculum in a search for ways to strengthen the academic quality of public education.

Several common characteristics emerged among the sample school studies. The average school was found to have received 50% of its budget from the state, 42% of its funds from the local district, and the remaining 8% from the federal government. Absenteeism, class-cutting, parent disinterest, and drug or alcohol abuse were identified as universal problems. A

general decline in SAT scores between 1952 and 1982 was observed and the report maintained that public support for education has been declining.

The report offers 12 goals for reform in secondary education: (1) "Clarifying Goals" states that every high school should have clearly stated goals that are understood by all those involved, (2) involves "the centrality of language" which stresses mastery of the language, and (3) advocates a core of common learning; strengthened traditional courses in literature, history, mathematics, and science and a new emphasis on foreign languages, the arts, civics, non-Western studies, technology, the meaning of work, and the importance of health. "Transition to Work and Living" is the fourth recommendation which stresses readiness for employment and for further lifelong education. "Service is the fifth recommendation; i.e., a "new Carnegie Unit" which would require every high school student to complete a service requirement involving work in the community or school in hope of building a feeling of community and common purpose.

The study is concerned with the teaching profession's declining esteem. The report found teachers to be troubled about loss of status, bureaucratic pressures, a negative public image, lack of recognition and rewards, and the threat of physical violence. The sixth recommendation, "Renewing the Teaching Process," suggests steps to acquire better teachers. Similarly, the seventh recommendation outlines ideas for better instructional methods.

Technology is another concern as the next recommendation exemplifies. "Technology: Extending the Teacher's Reach" is an effort to link computers to school objectives. The ninth recommendation, "Flexibility: Patterns to Fit Purpose," strives for a more flexible school pattern to permit larger blocks of instructional time especially in science, foreign languages, and creative writing. The study also proposes that schools develop special programs for the gifted student such as the International baccalaureate. Strong leadership is another priority; "The Principal as Leader," the panel proposes principal preparation to follow that of teachers, that more authority be granted to local schools, that school principals be given more authority and autonomy, and that outstanding principals be given special recognition.

Quality connections are another interest of the panel: "Connections" strives to strengthen the school-college relationship and an industry involvement via a classroom/ corporate partnership. "Excellence: The Public Commitment," the last goal, offers suggestions for improving the public commitment to education with the stipulation that the federal government must also be a partner in the process.

The High School Report concludes with an optimistic view that the American public education is beginning to improve, that declining test scores are now leveling off, that a core curriculum is beginning to be shaped, that college admission standards are being tightened, and that a renewal of interest in school is beginning.

V. The Holmes Group Report

The Holmes Group is a consortium of education deans and chief academic officers from the major research universities in each of the 50 states. The nucleus of the Holmes Group gathered to consider generally the issues confronting teaching and teacher education. The group has evolved into its present from over the past several years through a series of deliberations on the strengths and weaknesses of teacher education and the profession of teaching in the United States.

The first public report of the Holmes Group, Tomorrow's Teachers, consists of delineation of the problems with the status, rewards, and work associated with teaching that jeopardize the recruitment and preparation of qualified teachers. A number of potential obstacles to improving the quality and preparation of the teaching force and a detailed set of proposals for reform of teaching and teacher education was also included.

The Holmes Group differs in its commitment to improving the professional preparation of teachers in its recognition that teacher education is largely a creature of teaching itself; its career opportunities, reward structure, traditions of recruitment, working conditions, and authority relations in schools. Without substantial changes in the career of teaching, improvement in the selection and training of teachers will inevitably wither and evaporate. Without addressing the impact of labor-market and working conditions in teaching, schools of education will not be able to attract the clientele they

desire, nor will they be able to convince prospective teachers to invest in or endure the sort of extended academic study, professional education, and clinical experience that the Holmes leaders agree is needed. The teaching profession, they added, itself must be changed in order to reinforce and protect changes in the level, content, and standards of teacher education.

The Holmes Group also differs from most of its predecessors in its appreciation of the necessity of engaging talented teachers and committed administrators in the reform process. The group's leaders are aware of the limited and often unintended results of top-down reform. Just as they recognize that teacher education cannot be improved in isolation, they understand that reform cannot be arrogantly directed from political offices or academic departments.

These differences in the perspective of the Holmes leadership, coupled with the group's locus in institutions of teacher education, shaped the complex effort outlined in Tomorrow's Teachers. The Holmes Group appears to be dedicated not just to the improvement of teacher education, but to the construction of a genuine profession of teaching. Briefly, the group's five goals or proposals for action are:

1. To make the education of teachers more intellectually sounds; to make prospective teachers thoughtful students of teaching and its improvement. This will require reform of instruction in the preprofessional undergraduate liberal arts and sciences; of subject matter professional pedagogy

instruction; and of the clinical experiences in teacher education. Expanding the general education and subject matter exposure of prospective teachers will also require shifting professional academic and clinical studies from the undergraduate to the graduate level.

2. To recognize differences in teacher's knowledge, skill, and commitment, and in their education, certification, work, and career opportunities by distinguishing among novices, competent professional teachers, and high-level professional leaders.

3. To create standards of entry to the profession--examinations and educational requirements--that are professionally relevant and intellectually defensible.

4. To connect institutions of higher and professional education with public schools in order to make better use of expert teachers in the professional education and induction of other teachers and in research on teaching, and to build demonstration sites where new career opportunities can be developed and refined.

5. To make schools better places for teachers to work and for students to learn by altering the professional roles and responsibilities of teachers. This will require changes in the authority relationships in schools and in the nature and scope of autonomy for professional teachers. Attaining these ambitious goals will obviously depend on the collaboration of individuals associated with a variety of institutions sharing responsibility for shaping the educational enterprise:

university academic departments, professional schools of education, school districts, and state governments. In developing these goals and their corollary proposals for action, the Holmes Group anticipated struggles over their implementation and attempted to address many of the most serious concerns.

VI. The Carnegie Report

Another proposal for reform was issued at about the same time--the Carnegie Forum's Task Force on Education and the Economy, entitled A Nation Prepared. This and the previous report make a number of similar recommendations, but there are also important differences. As its title indicates, the Carnegie Report is intended as a response to the earlier report of the President's Commission on Excellence in Education, entitled, A Nation at Risk. As such, it follows that earlier document by focusing on what it claims to be the link between education and the economy. While the report refers to other functions of schooling, such as developing an informed citizenry and assuring equal opportunity, its primary focus is on the importance of a renewed teaching profession in helping the nation to meet the economic challenges it describes. Thus, whereas the Holmes Group has provided a report about the educational needs of the teaching profession and the structural changes that must be made to meet them, the Carnegie Forum has provided a statement about the competitive position of the United States in the international market and has elaborated the educational changes that improving this position would entail.

This is an important difference and raises certain questions about the content of the Carnegie Report that need not be raised about the Holmes document. For example, the basic point of the Carnegie Report is that dull, routine, repetitive work is moving to other areas of the world because American workers are no longer willing to do such work for the wages that workers in other countries are willing to accept. This means that if American labor is to be competitive in the years ahead, it will have to engage in highly technical activity requiring a good deal of intellectual training. Hence, schools which once were content to teach by drill and routine and to develop habits appropriate to the assembly line now need to be teaching more abstract skills and more flexible patterns of behavior. The plausibility of the Carnegie recommendation, therefore, depends on the accuracy of its assessment of the future economic needs of the country. However, the fact that it fails to address research showing that a substantial number of jobs will continue to require rather routine skills significantly detracts from the case it is trying to make.

Summary and Analysis

The recommendation emanating from the various reports mentioned in this article demonstrates dramatically the tension and debate over how to achieve excellence in teaching, and the conflicts of interest and value which run through the whole educational reform movement in the United States. The Bush administration has committed itself to facilitating, from its perspective, the implementation of reforms in the quality of

elementary, secondary, and teacher education. The conflicting values underlying opposing interests in the struggle to reform education in the United States, however, is as true now as it ever was.

The country is exploring (and experiencing) the problems of the struggle for "excellence" in educational achievement. Excellence is the goal; the means to achieve it is the dispute. There is a new dimension to the debate over how best to assess the academic achievement of elementary and secondary school students, in addition to the continuing struggle of conflicting academic (as well as political) interests over how to improve the quality of preparation of future teachers. Few conscientious educators would oppose promoting excellence in education. The problem in gaining consensus over providing excellence in education is that excellence is always defined against some standard. Since there are in existence fundamentally opposing standards for determining what constitutes excellent student performance, and teacher performance, it is sometimes debatable which standards of assessment should prevail. The current debate over excellence in teacher education in the United States clearly demonstrates how conflicting academic values can clash and lead to conflicting programmatic recommendations for educational reform.

The 1980s brought American educators many important individual and commission reports on how to bring qualitative improvement to the educational system at all levels. Some of the reports addressed higher education concerns (particularly

relating to general studies requirements and teacher education), but most of them focused on the academic performance problems of elementary and secondary school students. There were literally dozens of such reports. There have been some common themes in those reports on school reform sponsored by government, philanthropic, and corporate bodies. There has been some commonality in those reports issued to date by affected groups of educators. However, there are professional organizations in the teaching profession which take exception to what they believe to be too heavily laden hidden business and political agendas underlying some of the public rhetoric on school reform. Educators in teacher education are not in agreement either. There is still the debate as to whether academic goals or social goals should control the nature, content, and direction of educational change in America. Many have always believed that social goals must be secondary to academic ones in schools. Yet there are those who point out that there have always been important civic educational goals for schools due to the need to prepare children and adolescents for their roles as fully participating adults in society.

At times it appears problematic whether a workable national consensus on the push toward excellence in possible. What is coming to the fore of the debate over school reform in the United States is an opportunity to articulate and to negotiate meaningful clarifications and changes in the fundamental national and state education policies which have been in place for about the past 50 years.

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